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Demographic change: The ultimate goal of the Syrian regime's policy of forced displacement**Introduction**

Mass displacement is often a tragic, direct consequence of armed conflict and Syria is no exception. The Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity (SACD) will in a series of briefings examine the impact of forced displacement on various Syrian communities and the role and the goals of different actors in their displacement. We believe that such analysis is crucial to any meaningful solutions seeking to ensure a safe, voluntary and dignified return of some 13 million displaced Syrians, regardless of their background and who the perpetrators of their displacement were.

While most of actors involved in the conflict have engaged in various forms of forced displacement, it is now clear that for the Syrian regime and its Iranian and Russian allies the forced displacement of millions of Syrians since 2011 is not a mere consequence of the conflict, but a systematic policy to achieve strategic goals set out by Bashar Assad himself. This is why we decided to focus our first briefing from the series of papers on demographic change on the policy implemented by the Syrian regime.

Although the main target of this criminal policy of the Syrian regime seem to be the majority Sunni Muslims, who made up some 74% of pre-war population according to the International Religious Freedom Report 2006¹, and are seen as the main threat to the regime, yet in the implementation of this policy the regime targeted people of various backgrounds and affiliations, including Christians, Ismailis and other minorities. One of the people interviewed for this paper described the nature of the policy in these terms: "Demographic change that the Assad regime is undertaking seems not to be based on religion, but on the basis of political affiliation and loyalty to the ruler in order to build its own supportive society, his "useful Syria." Considering the systematic nature of this policy and the scale of displacement committed to achieve it, there is a gap in the analysis informing the international policy-oriented discourse of this systematic effort to affect a permanent demographic shift.

¹ International Religious Freedom Report 2006,
<https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71432.htm>

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In 2016, Assad explicitly and publicly stated the goals of this strategy when he spoke of "useful Syria", an area of the country both geographically and demographically crucial to the continuation of his rule. To achieve this utopia² of a loyal population concentrated in areas seen as strategically important, the Syrian regime unleashed a campaign of forced displacement and replacement which continues in various forms to this day.

The methods of forced displacement range from mass detention, torture and terrorising of people who raised their demands for reform to siege, starvation, indiscriminate attacks, including chemical attacks, on civilian population and infrastructure, to systematic repression and marginalization of entire areas seen as disloyal. In this effort, legislation was passed and measures taken to allow for confiscation of lands and property of the displaced people, to obstruct their return and to make it easier for foreign militia members and their families to obtain Syrian citizenship.

The policy continues being applied to this date, as documented in the most recent Human Rights Watch Report which details attacks on Idlib, which were part of the policy of forced displacement: "One result of the Idlib offensive was mass displacement. According to the UN, nearly 1.4 million people across Idlib fled their homes during the period covered in this report, out of an estimated population of 3 million people. Many said they fled because of repeated attacks in populated areas, or feared ill treatment if Syrian regime forces were to retake the area. The repeated Syrian-Russian alliance attacks on civilian infrastructure in populated areas in which there was no apparent military objective suggests that these unlawful attacks were deliberate. The intent may have been to deprive local residents of the means to sustain themselves, to force the civilian population to flee and make it easier for Syrian ground forces to take territory, or simply to instil terror in the civilian population as a way to achieve victory. The Syrian-Russian alliance apparently intended to fulfil these aims with little regard for international law," states the HRW report³.

To make the removal of the people seen as a threat to the regime from the targeted areas permanent, their forced displacement is always followed by a campaign of populating now empty areas with members of foreign militias and religious groups seen as loyal to the regime, mainly Shiites linked to Iran's presence and Alawites, a majority of whom are loyal to Bashar Al Assad. Such policies closely resemble the policies of ethnic cleansing seen in

² "Loyalty over geography: Re-interpreting the notion of "Useful Syria", Mathias Sulz, Syria Comment, 2018 <https://www.clingendael.org/publication/re-interpreting-notion-useful-syria>

³ "Targeting Life in Idlib" – Syrian and Russian Strikes on Civilian Infrastructure, HRW, October 2020, <https://www.hrw.org/report/2020/10/15/targeting-life-idlib/syrian-and-russian-strikes-civilian-infrastructure>

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Bosnia and Herzegovina and elsewhere, which aimed to affect a new reality by permanently removing the previous demographic majority and replacing it, at least partially, with population seen as loyal. This analysis aims to highlight some of the key elements of these policies and illustrate its impact on the affected communities.

Methods of cementing demographic change

Mass arrest and security crackdowns

From the earliest days of the popular demonstrations in 2011, when people flooded the streets of Syrian cities to demand reform and dignity, the Syrian regime resorted to mass arrests, enforced disappearances, torture and targeting of those who it suspected of anti-regime sentiment, as well as their families. The resulting sense of insecurity was the cause of displacement for more than 90% of people who left regime-held areas, according to our major survey on the causes of displacement and conditions for return "We Are Syria."⁴ These security reasons included various forms of security threats: the fear of arrest, unchecked power of security services, absence of the rule of law, and forced recruitment. Fear of Assad's security apparatus was the most important cause of displacement from the regime-held areas during all years of the conflict with 96% of people surveyed naming it as a cause of displacement in 2011 and 94% in 2018. The security conditions continued to deteriorate even as the areas under the regime's control expanded, marking the end of military operations in those areas.

Systematic siege, starvation and destruction

City after city, town after town, where people rose up against the repression of the Syrian regime, were systematically reduced to rubble in relentless bombardment and shelling, and its citizens subjected to starvation, widespread targeting of civilian areas and chemical attacks. The policy's end goal was not only to conquer these areas militarily, but also to remove the population through either physical destruction or forced displacement. The intended effect of the endless brutality of this policy was to drive the original inhabitants of these areas out permanently, to kill any desire they may have to return to

⁴ "We Are Syria", Report, Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity, July 2020

<https://syacd.org/we-are-syria/>

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their homes. And even if such desire exists, the regime's policy aimed to destroy the homes and infrastructure to such a degree as to make these areas uninhabitable until the regime approves their reconstruction under the new, discriminatory laws which would strip most of the owners and residents of their property and housing rights and make their displacement permanent. Such scenario was seen in the old Homs, Al-Waer neighborhood, Eastern and Western Ghouta, Al-Qalamoun, Moadamiya, Qudsaya, Al-Qusayr, Eastern Aleppo, the Jobar neighborhood in Damascus⁵, Idlib countryside, Hama and elsewhere. The hundreds of thousands who left their homes settled either in the neighbouring countries or in the north of Syria, leaving entire swaths of the country empty and at the regime's disposal to engineer its plan of a "useful Syria".

Confiscation of lands and demolishing of buildings

Cementing displacement of the original owners of land and property in areas deemed as "useful Syria" is one of the most prevalent methods used by the Syrian regime. This is done through discriminatory legislation and decrees, which are always passed under the guise of "reconstruction and re-organisation" of areas, which have in the past seen a high degree of opposition to the regime. Some of the best-known examples include Basatin Mezzeh and Kafr Sousse, whose residents were stripped of their properties by the Decree 66 of 2012, under the pretext of establishing the Marota City project. Other areas include Daraya, Al Qadam and Al Qanawat, which cover an area equivalent to about 10% of the total the area of Damascus, whose residents saw their properties confiscated without compensation equivalent to property or even housing in lieu of the confiscated housing^{6,7}. This decree was followed by Decree No. 10 of 2018, which permits the establishment of "planning zones" throughout Syria, designated for reconstruction without specific criteria for classifying the area as a "planning zone," or a timetable for designating areas. Local authorities have the power to request real estate owners to register within 45 days of an area being designated as a planning zone. In the event that property owners do not appear, and the vast majority are unable to do so as they have been

⁵ Syria: 'Surrender or starve' strategy displacing thousands amounts to crimes against humanity, 13 November 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/11/syria-surrender-or-starve-strategy-displacing-thousands-amounts-to-crimes-against-humanity/>

⁶ Decree 66 and the Impact of its National Expansion, Mar 7, 2018 by Joseph Daher <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/syriacouncil/decrees-66-and-the-impact-of-its-national-expansion/>

⁷ "Houses of Illusion": Decree 66 breaches its promises and displaces Syrian families, Daraj, March 11 2020 <https://daraj.com/40886/>

⁸ After they were expelled from their areas, the residents of "Mezzeh and Kafarsusa" are demanding the regime for alternative housing! May 31 2020 <https://bit.ly/35vfcNr>

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forcibly displaced, they are given another 30-day period to provide proof of ownership, after which their property is confiscated by the Syrian regime, without the possibility of appeal or compensation⁹. Since 2011, the Syrian regime has adopted an array of laws and decrees that enable it to confiscate property without any supervision or accountability, which primarily target the population displaced from the areas of Assad's "useful Syria". These laws are designed to establish a new reality on the ground, where lawful owners of land and property are replaced by the regime itself, which then distributes the titles to the groups it perceives as loyal, or foreign militias which have taken part in the forced displacement itself.

The latest example comes from Marat al-Numan¹⁰ and Hamā¹¹ where homes and agricultural lands belonging to displaced locals seen as anti-regime was put up for a public auction. The land and properties were sold at symbolic prices and the main buyers were members of Iranian militias who participated in the most recent onslaught on Idlib.¹²

Destruction of property documents

Since 2011, regime's forces and associated militias have targeted civil and property registries in many locations. One clear example of that was the targeting of the Homs registry in 2013¹³.

This pattern of attacks coupled with the legislations and laws that made proving property ownership by displaced Syrians after the deliberate destruction of their properties much harder helped the regime in granting new ownerships, by stripping it from the original owners, mostly Sunnis, and give them as compensation to residents loyal to the Assad regime, mainly from other demographic backgrounds.^{14 15}

⁹ Syria's New Property Law , HRW, May 29 2018 ,

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/05/29/qa-syrias-new-property-law>

¹⁰ <https://twitter.com/Freedomsham2011/status/1319269981821964288?s=20>

¹¹ Syria: Properties of Opponents Confiscated and Real-Estate Transactions Restricted in Hama, STJ, March 20, 2019 <https://stj-sy.org/en/1228/> , <https://bit.ly/3kutaFE>

¹² There are indications that similar destruction of property records took place elsewhere in Syria, including Deri Ezzor, but it is extremely hard to obtain a reliable confirmation of such information.

¹³ Weaponization of the Land and Property Rights system in the Syrian civil war: facilitating restitution?, Journal of Intervention and State building, by Jon D. Unruh, Mar 16 2016 <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17502977.2016.1158527>

¹⁴ The burning of the real estate registry in the city of Homs, Al Jazeera report, July 1 2013 , <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MXz8lqDA1DI>

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Naturalization of foreign militias

The Syrian regime never made it a secret that the project of demographic change in "useful Syria" as a primary goal and the reduction of the population seen as disloyal, to be replaced with loyalists and imported groups which mostly make up the militias fighting for the regime with members from Afghanistan, Iraq, and Lebanon¹⁶.¹⁷ Sunni's have been marked as a potential threat to Assad's rule and to replace them, especially in some key areas, the regime has employed a system of fast-tracked naturalization of foreigners, primarily the militia members and their families. This policy has to date resulted in a significant increase in Shiite population loyal to Assad in the targeted areas of Syria.

The Middle East Media Research Institute website has published pictures of the Citizenship decisions for Iranian militia members issued by the Syrian intelligence¹⁸. The letter contained a list, provided by the "special office" in the Syrian President's Office, of Iranians to be granted Syrian citizenship. In May 2018, the Lebanese daily Annahar published an article by journalist Ahmad 'Ayyash which stated, citing diplomatic sources, that the Syrian president "has issued Syrian identity cards to some two million Iranians and operatives of militias belonging to the Iranian IRGC Quds Force, and to their families, as well to Hezbollah [operatives]. The [regime] does not just issue them Syrian identity cards, but helps them to settle in parts of Damascus's Ghouta and in the rural areas of Damascus, Hama, Homs and Aleppo that have been emptied of their original inhabitants¹⁹

Lasting impact of demographic change

It is very difficult to obtain any reliable recent statistics which would show the real extent and impact of the regime's policy of demographic change. The King Faisal Institute for Research and Islamic Studies published a report²⁰ which compiled data comparing the census from 2011 and research from 2016 to show the advancing dynamics of the process of demographic change

¹⁵ Culturalatlas, <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/syrian-culture/syrian-culture-religion>

¹⁶ Iraqi Shiite Foreign Fighters on the Rise Again in Syria , Washington institute , Phillip Smyth, May 29, 2015, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iraqi-shiite-foreign-fighters-on-the-rise-again-in-syria>

¹⁷ Recruited by Iran to fight for Syrian regime, young Afghans bring home cash and scars, Washington post, By Pamela Constable, July 29, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/recruited-by-iran-to-fight-for-syrian-regime-young-afghans-bring-home-cash-and-scars/2018/07/29/ecf9e34c-64e0-11e8-81ca-bb14593acaa6_story.html

¹⁸ Anti-Syrian Regime Websites: Regime Granting Citizenship To Millions Of Iranians, Hizbullah Operatives To Change Country's Demographics From Sunni To Shi'ite Majority, Conceal The Fighters' Presence In Syria, Memri, November 21, 2018 ,https://www.memri.org/reports/syrian-regime-granting-citizenship-to-iranians-hizbullah-operatives#_ednref1

¹⁹ Previous source

²⁰ "Useful Syria" and Demographic Changes in Syria , king faisal center for research and islamic studies,2016, <https://kfcris.com/pdf/5e43a7813784133606d70cc8b52d433b5909a9623e8c2.pdf>

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in Assad's "useful Syria." The report shows that in these areas, the number of Sunnis has decreased dramatically, by some 3 million, while the Shiite population has at the same time grown by almost a million. However, these statistics are more than four years old and do not capture the displacement that took place since 2016 across Syria, nor do the numbers show the lasting impact of these demographic shifts.

Year	Population Group	Damascus	Rif Damascus	Homs	Hama	Latakia	Tartus	Total	Per Cent
	Sunnis	1583	2460	1154	1093	372	140	6802	69%
	Alawites	82	114	455	274	580	550	2055	21%
	Shiites	24	26	38	2	2	0	92	1%
Population in 2011	Ismailis	2	3	3	168	2	58	236	2%
	Duruz	5	94	0	0	0	0	99	1%
	Christians	58	139	153	91	52	49	542	6%
Total		1754	2836	1803	1628	1008	9826	100%	
	Sunnis	1867	783	221	757	221	101	3950	52%
	Alawites	85	97	394	234	532	501	1843	24%
	Shiites	271	350	299	16	40	40	1016	13%
Population in 2016	Ismailis	2	3	3	154	2	60	224	3%
	Duruz	5	82	0	0	0	0	87	1%
	Christians	62	122	135	82	55	49	505	7%
Total		2292	1437	1052	1243	850	7625	100%	

Figure 1 (All Figures in Thousands)

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Demographic change is not only about the numbers. The methods of displacement and the trauma that goes with the brutality that is usually deployed to make people leave their homes and stay away; the manufacturing of a new reality where native residents feel as strangers in their own places of birth; the aggressive changes in the sectarian or religious spirit and custom of the communities; economic and social pressures exerted on specific groups, while at the same time privileging other groups which are being settled as a replacement demographic; all these factors constitute elements of demographic change that numbers can't capture. In an attempt to get a more recent picture of the impact of the regime's policy of demographic change, we sought to take a snapshot in several communities across Syria to see how they have been affected by the policy. We conducted interviews with people from Aleppo, Homs, Al-Qusayr, Deir Ezzor, Salamiyah and Daraya. They were willing to share their insights under strict condition of anonymity as they live in areas controlled by the regime's security apparatus.

M.H. works for a humanitarian organization which allows him to visit various regions of Syria under the regime's control. He noted a significant shift in the demographic picture of Aleppo. "There was no Shiite presence in the city, with only two villages in the northern countryside of Aleppo - Nubl and Zahra – with Shia majority. There was also a shrine inside the city frequented by foreign Shia pilgrims. After the fall of the city to the Syrian regime forces in 2016, the devastated Aleppo turned into a ghost town devoid of its citizens. Only a few of the original inhabitants remained and soon one could notice a rapid change taking place. The residents of Foua and Kafraya²¹were settled in the areas of Neirab and Marjah, in addition to the intensive growth of population around the two Shiite areas of Nubl and Zahraa and the settlement of members of the same group, including both Syrian and foreign Shiites in the Mashhad area (Maqam Al-Hussein). The available housing in the city is mainly allotted to foreign Shiites or Syrians loyal to the regime, with large numbers of displaced original inhabitants selling their properties at extremely low prices as they are unable to return," says M.H.

²¹ Syrian rebels, Iran reach deal to evacuate villages, 2016,
<https://uk.reuters.com/article/instant-article/idUKKBN1K72F1>

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Iranian Defense Minister Amir Hatami in Old Aleppo, 2018, Source: Fars News Agency.

“In the eastern countryside of Aleppo, Sunni families and clans have converted to Shiism and joined military brigades supported by Iran such as Liwa al-Baqir. Many clans and residents of the eastern countryside of Aleppo and the southern countryside of Raqqa, down to Deir Ezzor, who were previously with ISIS, joined the reconciliations under Iranian auspices and began receiving support, training, and attending religious sessions to convert to the Shiite sect after the Syrian regime took control of these regions. This is also the case in the southern countryside of Aleppo, which before 2011 was almost entirely populated by Sunnis, and has now become a hub of the Shiite forces supported by Iran. In areas such as Al-Sefira and Al-Dhahabiya, there is now a dominant presence of Shiite militias and their families, while Tal Al-Daman, Al-Wadhi and Al-Hader have become restricted areas for only Afghan and Iraqi nationals, who almost completely replaced the original inhabitants who were displaced during the last military operation carried out by foreign militias,” claims M.H. echoing previously reported information about the impact of Iranian efforts at cementing a social, as well as military and economic stranglehold over areas under its control²²

²² Iran's Long Shadow in Syria, political violence at a glance, May 9 2019,

<https://politicalviolenceataglance.org/2019/05/09/irans-long-shadow-in-syria/>

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The Christian community in Syria has also suffered massive displacement, and, while the roots of it extend beyond 2011 and the rule of Bashar Al-Assad, it clearly shows a pattern of a systematic policy. "I was a son of the city of Aleppo, and I worked as a lawyer there," says Ibrahim Melki, a lawyer from Aleppo. "When Hafez al-Assad came into power, as Christians, we did not feel that there was a systematic demographic change policy against the Christian community in Aleppo, but we saw an increase in financial and sort of ideological pressure through its security apparatus. Due to these pressures, Syrian Christians began emigrating. Most of the Christians in Aleppo are merchants, industrialists and capital owners. But after the Assad regime took power, it began to build its own merchant class, and the security services in Aleppo worked to impose informal royalties on Christian merchants and industrialists. We can say that the Syrian government used economic tools in a long term strategy to force Christians to emigrate after their livelihoods were being increasingly restricted, especially in the city of Aleppo, which is considered the economic and industrial capital of Syria.

Mr. Melki added: "The Syrian regime has always had an authoritarian and totalitarian structure, it is not a state in the traditional sense of the state. This prompted the Christians in Aleppo to liquidate their businesses and emigrate to Europe. This was not only the case with Christians. For example, the regime of Hafez al-Assad, through its security services, applied similar pressures against the Assyrians in Hasaka, which forced them to emigrate and leave their homes and lands, especially the youth, due to the increasing hardship under the Assad regime. After the beginning of the revolution, Syrian Christians were affected like most of the Syrian people, and were forced to flee, to leave their homes and property. Those who supported the Syrian regime were allowed to remain. But now, after the revolution, I think we can talk about the regime's policy of demographic change being implemented in Syria against the Christian community. Most striking examples of this include areas such as Bab Touma and Bab Sharqi in the city of Damascus, the area known for its Christian Damascene population, people's properties were bought by the Iranians at very extortionist prices that illustrate the policy of intimidation where you are forced to sell almost for nothing. This area has seen a noticeable change in the demographic structure and is now dominated by Iranians and their militias.

Mr. Melki also referred to other regions in Syria suffering the same pattern of policy: "In the eastern region, rich with oil wells, a form of this policy was

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implemented through employment. The Syrian regime was not giving jobs to the residents of the region, but rather it imported people from the Syrian coast, overwhelmingly Alawites, to employ them in this region. Why bring Syrians from thousands of kilometers away and not give the jobs to the residents of the area, who are experts in this work? When you see that the people brought from the coast are all from the sects loyal to the regime, you can see the answer. This pushed large numbers of Christian youth to emigrate, and the Rumailan area is the most striking example of the impact of this policy.

Mr. Melki concluded: "I think that the demographic change that the Assad regime is undertaking is not based on religion, but on the basis of political affiliation and loyalty to the ruler in order to build its own supportive society, his "useful Syria". The regime has implemented the policy of demographic change against the Syrian people of all ethnicities and religions. That is why I call on the Syrians to cling to their property and land, to keep their property documents and not to forfeit them even if they are forced to migrate temporarily. We must adhere to our right to return, once this fascist regime is gone. Whoever thinks Assad's rule, which has been built on the blood of Syrians, can remain intact, he is delusional".

"In Homs, which was seen as the 'capital of the revolution,' most of the Sunni inhabitants were displaced as a result of the siege, starvation, killings and indiscriminate bombing of the opposition-held areas. Only a fraction of the Sunni community remains inside the city," says S.A. "Immediately after the fall of Homs, the Alawites, who overwhelmingly sided with the Syrian regime, started to leave their areas and neighbourhoods where they had lived before the popular revolt, such as Al-Nuzha and Wadi Al-Dahab, to move into areas from which the original inhabitants were removed, such as the Abbasein, Bab Dreib, Bab Amr, and Karm Al-Zaitoun, occupying the empty houses, especially in the old Homs."

"The Homsis who did not leave feel that they have become strangers in their own city, in which they and their ancestors lived in. And while the Syrian regime's propaganda speaks of "equality of all Syrians" at the same time it is



Homs, destruction following the siege by regime forces, 2014, Source: Sergey Ponomarev - Russian photographer.

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facilitating mass arrivals of foreign people into the city through organisations and groups such as Al-Bustan and Ahl Al-Sham, which exclusively work with the Alawite and Shiite communities," says S.A.

A city in the southern countryside of Homs, Al-Qusayr, is Hezbollah's gateway to Syria and a launching pad for its operations in the country, as well as a most blatant example of the participation of regime's allies in the policy of demographic change.



Al-Qusayr is today a Hezbollah base with no access for the displaced, 2015, Source: Almayadeen TV

"The city of Al-Qusayr is known as a city inhabited by the majority of Sunnis, with some presence of Christians and a small number of Alawites. It is surrounded by a large number of small villages inhabited by a diversity of people, Shiite, Alawite and Sunni. In the sixth month of 2013, the Syrian forces took control of the city with the support of Hezbollah after a very violent military campaign, forcing most of its citizens to leave their homes and flee to Lebanon and Idlib," says A.A., a SACD member and a resident of Al-Qusayr who fled days before the Hezbollah forces entered.

"When Hezbollah took control of the city, its forces immediately started destroying homes in the city, especially in the northern neighbourhood, cutting trees and burning agricultural lands, to eliminate any possibility of people returning. In parallel, they deployed their agents among the displaced from Al-Qusayr – especially those who fled to Lebanon's Aarsal Mountains - in order to persuade them to sell their properties, taking the advantage of their state of extreme poverty. They purchased these properties cheaply and registered

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them in the names of the Shiite Syrians from the surrounding villages who hold Lebanese citizenship, such as al-Diyaabiya, al-Burhani, al-Saqarja, Hawik, al-Masriya, al-Aqrabiyya, al-Safsafa, and al-Zayti," says A.A.

"Importantly, the agricultural lands in the city of Al-Qusayr and its countryside have been transformed by Hezbollah to cultivate opium. By linking Shiite villages on the Lebanese side of the border with the likes of Al-Qasr and Hermel on the Syrian side, and settling formerly Sunni villages with Shiites settled Lebanon, the border effectively disappeared and this belt today serves as Hezbollah's gateway for smuggling between Syria and Lebanon and a major center for opium cultivation. Return to Al-Qusayr is possible only for those close to the regime, who can get Hezbollah to agree to their return after the regime-affiliated bodies conducted a security check of their names," says A.A.

In reference to other regions, A.E., a political activist from Deir Ezzor said: "The people of Deir Ezzor have suffered forcible displacement from several actors: the Syrian regime and its allies, primarily Iranian militias, the ISIS, and later from the Syrian Democratic Forces. Every displacement operation carried out by one of these parties was accompanied by a policy of demographic change, aiming to shift the population structure in line with its ideology and alliances. At every stage, the population of Deir Ezzor city suffered further decline, and the displacement of its people became more permanent.

"When the Syrian regime forces took control of the south-eastern bank of the Euphrates River, the city's demographic structure was forcibly changed in accordance with the vision where the area was part of the belt populated by Alawite and Shiite population creating a geographical link from Iran through Iraq and Syria, ending in Lebanon," says A.E. "Sunnis left the city to the countryside due to the deterioration of security, widespread unemployment, and the collapse of the infrastructure, in addition to the cementing of the Iranian presence which made no secret of its plans to change the population structure in the region. For example, there is an organization called the Iranian "Jihad al-Binaa (Jihad of Building)", which opened an office in the city of Albu Kamal, in the eastern countryside of Deir Ezzor. Its sole purpose is to facilitate purchase of homes and reconstruction of housing for the Assad forces and the Iranian militias. Organisations like this make clear demands of the displaced people who express intention to return to the area that any assistance or guarantees for return are linked in some way to the conversion to the Shiite teachings."

One of the striking examples of the Syrian regime's policy of demographic

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change in Damascus countryside is the city of Daraya. Here, the Syrian regime and Russia refused to end the siege through a settlement or a "reconciliation agreement" as elsewhere in Syria, but insisted that all those besieged in Daraya go to either the city of Kiswa in the Damascus countryside, or to the areas outside the control of regime forces²³



Civilians forced to flee Daraya under "reconciliation agreement" with the Syrian regime, 2016, Source: Reuters

Daraya, a city of some 255 thousand people, was originally inhabited by a majority of Sunnis, with some Christians in the southern part of the city. The displacement of Daraya's people started after a horrific massacre which occurred in August 2012²³, as the city did not sleep for several days due to the very intense random shelling against civilians in addition to the flying helicopters and their bombing of defenceless civilians. After that, the Syrian regime army and Syrian security forces invaded the city backed by tanks and helicopters as revenge operations, indiscriminate killings and mass field executions against the city's residents began,

There were executions of entire families, where the houses were stormed by the Syrian army forces and the families were completely liquidated, including the Saqqa family, but they were not satisfied with this, but rather they represented the bodies, burned and mutilated them so that human rights and media organizations or families could not identify their relatives or friends. The major massacres took place these days, which is the massacre that took place inside the (Abu Suleiman al-Darani) mosque and in the vicinity of the mosque, as there was near it a house with a shelter inside it, to which large numbers of

²³The Great Daraya massacre, daraya council, 2012,

<http://darayacouncil.org/index.php/%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1%D8%A9/%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%B2%D8%B1%D8%A9-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%83%D8%A8%D8%B1%D9%89.html>

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civilians fled from their nearby homes and sought refuge there, and they found all of them killed and their bodies piled on top of each other. The names of 156 dead were documented, including 19 bodies of women and 3 bodies of children after which scores of people left terrorised by the fear of the regime's security apparatus.

"After two months of the military campaign, the regime's forces laid a siege to the city, making it impossible for anyone to leave it," says M.R. who was among the last people to leave Daraya. "During four years of the siege, the Syrian regime's forces used the most powerful weapons, they bombed the remaining residents in the city with barrel bombs, with chemical weapons, but they failed to make the residents to surrender. But when Russia entered with its scorched earth tactics, the people could not hold out, and they entered into a negotiation process. The negotiators on behalf of the people of the city tried to reach reconciliation with the regime forces and the Russians to stay in the city, but there was a categorical refusal. The residents had two options, either to stay and be exterminated in the city or to leave to Idlib or the city of al-Kiswah."

"After the displacement, no one was able to return to Daraya. The Syrian regime prevents the residents from entering, except under very strict conditions, where one has to register with the municipality and fill out a form that includes all the details about the person and their family members, the title deed. Then they have to wait for their names to be submitted to the National Security Office and the regime's Fourth Division for a security check and approvals. Anyone who is listed as approved by the municipality will get a card that allows them to enter for only several hours exclusively from the southern entrance. Many residents registered their data to enter more than two years ago and until now they have not obtained consent to enter."

Currently, Daraya is under the control of the regime's Air Force Intelligence and the Fourth Division, and, more importantly, under the heavy presence of Iranian militias and Hezbollah, especially in the area surrounding the Sukinah shrine. This Shiite shrine was established in 2003 by the regime and could be the reason for the complete removal of Daraya's people. The shrine was expanded by Iran and now serves as a pilgrimage site around which the fresh population of Shiite background is being settled. Clearly, Iran is remaking Daraya as a place within its sphere of influence," says M.R.

Salamiyah is a city in Hama governorate, where the Ismaili community forms the majority population, and while it has escaped the fate of predominantly Sunni areas in Hama which have seen its people terrorized and forcibly displaced, its demographic structure was reengineered. "The city of Salamiyah presented a different challenge to the Syrian regime, since we Ismailis are a minority, and

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the regime wanted to present an image of a protector of minorities, but it still did not trust the community here," says R.R, an Ismaili from Salamiyah. "The approach here too focused on conversion of the entire areas to Shiism of the people living in Salaamiyah, and especially the Ismailis. The regime settled a large number of Shiite militias here and used the fact that Ismailis consider themselves a part of the Shiite sect to normalize their presence and the privileges they received. Whoever objected to this policy was either arrested by the Assad's forces or was restricted economically and socially. People faced the choice to either fully convert, to become inferior citizens in their own city or were forced to emigrate outside Syria. Increasingly, the people who got detained or left were replaced by more Shiite militia members. It is clear that the regime intends to cement sectarian dominance and transform the Salamiyah area into a Shiite area," says R.R.

Obstacles to return

The Syrian regime's policies which combine forced displacement, discriminatory legislation and re-populating areas with loyal groups, are not novel. We saw similar efforts at engineering new realities with the aim of making demographic change permanent in Bosnia and Herzegovina, when the policy of "ethnic cleansing"²⁴ was employed by the Serb leadership (and others) to carve out ethnically clean, loyal territories in areas which were previously dominated by Bosnian Muslims and other ethnic groups. And as in Bosnia, Nagorno Karabakh and elsewhere where these criminal policies were used to redraw the demographic picture of a country or territory, in Syria the regime's aim is to make the displacement of those it sees as enemies of the regime permanent and fortify its hold over the territory. One of the key elements of the strategy, therefore, is to solidify this new reality by constantly creating more and new obstacles and deterrents to mass return of the original inhabitants of these areas.

Obstructing the return of refugees

Although the Syrian regime wants to appear as responsive to Russian initiatives for return of Syrian refugees, in reality its political discourse and actions reveal the high degree of hostility towards the displaced. The regime does not want them back nor does it show any interest in returning refugees as content in its political discourse. And while there are various formal and informal initiatives by Russia, Hezbollah and the Lebanese General Security Service serving as public relations exercises to show that "at least some displaced people are returning", the Syrian regime is at the same time creating fresh obstacles aimed at severely limiting the number of any potential returnees. Some of these tactics include:

²⁴Genocide in Bosnia: The Policy of Ethnic Cleansing, Norman Cigar, 1995

<https://www.questia.com/library/3205447/genocide-in-bosnia-the-policy-of-ethnic-cleansing>

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- Prior security approval: a procedure equivalent in all its details to obtaining an “entry visa” for Syrians to allow them to return to their original areas. For example, refugees in Lebanon cannot return through any formal return initiative without first obtaining security approval from the relevant regime agencies. The implications of this policy are that people stay away even if they have the slightest fear of being accused of a crime by the regime's security, as leaving Syria in the first place is regarded as a felony.
- People who wish to return to Assad-held areas must now sign a “reconciliation document” in order to return—particularly those returning from opposition or former opposition areas, or who left the country without official documents or permission, as is the case for many refugees. The content of the document, which must be lodged with the Syrian embassy in the host country before being allowed to return, speaks of “addressing the situation of Syrians who left the country illegally, due to the current circumstances and (...) settling their military conscription and other security issues, regardless of the circumstances that compelled them to leave”. Signing the document amounts to a confession of having committed a legal violation by leaving the country.
- Returnees are constantly arrested and some were forcibly disappeared. According to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, the Syrian regime forces have arrested at least 1,846 people who have returned to their original areas of residence, from the beginning of 2017 until March 2019, in addition to documenting 13 cases of death under torture for returnees during the same period of time. Just for illustration, the SNHR documented at least 146 cases of arbitrary arrest/detention in Syria in August 2020.²⁵ Our previous reports confirm that returnees are targeted for arrest, forced disappearance, forced recruitment, harassment and extortion²⁶
- Most of the returnees are transferred to temporary accommodation and camps, instead of being allowed to return to their original areas. This only makes them IDPs again, and they become vulnerable to repressive actions of the regime's security apparatus and therefore return becomes another form of asylum²⁷.
Information about the dangers facing returnees reaches their relatives and friends who are in displacement and base their own decisions on whether to return on the experience of those who have returned before them. So, the repressive acts described above are directed at those who have returned, but are also supposed to serve as a deterrent for the vast majority of the displaced who have not returned yet.

²⁵ Cases of Arrest against Refugees Returning from Lebanon to Syria Documented: Return Remains Unsafe, SNHR, September 2, 2020, <http://sn4hr.org/blog/2020/09/02/55419/>

²⁶ Between Hammer and Anvil, SACD, Nov 15 2019, <https://syacd.org/between-hammer-and-anvil/>

²⁷ Displaced Syrians forced to return to Assad-held areas from Rukban facing detention, torture, death, SACD, April 06 2019, <https://syacd.org/displaced-syrians-forced-to-return-to-assad-held-areas-from-rukban-facing-detention-torture-death/>

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Repression of remaining residents considered not loyal

The so-called "reconciliation agreements", which were concluded between the regime and areas which were under opposition control, usually under Russian guarantees, nominally allow civilians to remain in their homes, but in reality, are another vehicle for permanent displacement. The minority that decided to stay under such agreement were exposed to the worst kinds of pressure, deprivation and persecution, which included:

- Mass arrests and forced recruitment drives such as those in Daraa and Eastern Ghouta. In the case of Daraa, the ongoing arrests and repression led to armed clashes and the complete unravelling of the reconciliation agreement. Dozens of people in other areas were arrested and disappeared only in the last three months.
- Preventing residents from restoring their damaged homes, and this applies specifically to a number of areas that were under opposition control and returned to regime control, such as Eastern Ghouta, which makes residing in these homes nearly impossible, given their partial or total damage.
- Deliberate failure to re-establish public services such as power lines and landlines.
- Close certain areas to residents, families and returnees, such as Daraya.
- Continuous demolitions of buildings inside these areas under the pretext of destroying tunnels established by armed opposition factions and remnants of explosives. Satellite imagery, according to a Human Rights Watch report²⁸, showed that home demolitions are carried out with heavy machinery moving on the ground, such as bulldozers and excavators. The report said that it is clear that many of the buildings that were demolished were also clearly intact, and that they were probably inhabited and not demolished because they were damaged by the air strikes. In addition, the regime's media²⁹ regularly publish announcements that the "engineering units detonate explosive devices and ammunition left by terrorists" in different areas of Damascus countryside, especially Daraya (more than two years after its control).

²⁸Syria: Residents Blocked From Returning, October 16, 2018

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/10/16/syria-residents-blocked-returning>

²⁹ Detonation of terrorist remnants in the Darya region of Damascus countryside, Ministry of Defense, SYR 20 October 2018 <http://www.mod.gov.sy/index.php?node=5642&nid=24292&First=0&Last=8906&CurrentPage=1&FD&TD&&ctr=655>

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Waiting game

It is clear that the strategy pursued by the regime relies on “buying time” to stabilize and cement the demographic change. This is one of the key reasons for the constant delaying of any meaningful political solution which would envisage the return of refugees and restoring their rights. This strategy aims to reduce the number of those who wish to return, counting with the displaced people starting new lives elsewhere and the passage of time making it more difficult to make the decision to return, should there come a time for a comprehensive agreement which would guarantee people's right to return in a safe and dignified manner. The research SACD conducted for the “We Are Syria” report confirms the impact of passage of time in displacement on the community bonds which are crucial for any hope of massive return, especially on refugees whose lives are taking root in other countries. So, while 84 per cent of the IDPs chose “the return of both displaced relatives and acquaintances” as a condition for return, only 59 per cent of refugees made this a condition; 34 per cent of refugees reported that “this point is not within their conditions for return”. This reflects the impact of displacement on refugees, and particularly the weakening of the family structure amidst the progressively diminishing social ties for many of them. This is a focal point in understanding the social impacts of migration and displacement; it also highlights the social conditions necessary to achieve a collective return in Syria. The issue of return cannot be addressed at the individual level; it should be handled through a comprehensive solution and an organized collective, voluntary, safe and dignified return.

Also, the “new demographic reality” manufactured by the regime would be used to further delay implementation of any agreement, especially when it comes to the implementation of property rights of displaced Syrians as significant effort would need to be invested in reversing discriminatory legislation to restore the ownership rights of the displaced, or to find alternative housing for Assad loyalists who are now occupying the homes of those who were forced to leave. However, as the Bosnian example shows, these obstacles can be dismantled if there are strong international guarantees for the implementation of a political solution that guarantees the rights of the displaced to return in safety and dignity.

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The rights of the displaced must be taken seriously and placed at the heart of the future political solution. Syrians have lost so much and have suffered for so long that one thing they have truly won and will never give up on must be factored in as the foundation of any solution – their dignity. It is impossible to seriously consider any of the currently ongoing elements of the political process without addressing one key issue – creating safe environment for a voluntary and dignified return of the displaced. Elections are impossible without this. Verification of the new constitution is impossible without this. Reconstruction is impossible without this. Organized return is impossible without this.

The basic rights guaranteed in such an agreement would include the right to return and have property and tenancy rights restored to the point before March 2011, and the right to a safe and dignified return without a risk of persecution, harassment, discrimination, intimidation or humiliation on the basis of ethnicity, political orientation, religious affiliation, or any other grounds. Other rights guaranteed before any organized return would include, among others, the right to freedom of movement throughout Syria; the right to choose destination of return, including the right to exchange or sell property without hindrance or any form of prohibitive discrimination; the right to sufficient information on the prevailing conditions of return; and the right to refuse return to situations of serious danger of insecurity, or to areas lacking basic infrastructure for a normal life.

A number of confidence building measures, including the release of all political prisoners and all those detained under the pretext of them rebelling against the regime, institution of an accountability mechanism to investigate allegations of war crimes and crimes against humanity, removal of officials and security personnel documented by the relevant UN bodies to have committed serious crimes; amnesty from prosecution regarding political or crimes resulting from political action or displacement; amnesty from recruitment to the armed forces for returnees (making it a matter of choice) for duration of at least five years. Resolving the issue of detainees is a prerequisite for refugees and displaced Syrians to consider going back since they consider themselves to be in the same legal situation as those imprisoned by the Syrian regime.

Laws issued by the Syrian regime in recent years that give it the right to pursue and arrest political opponents must be repealed, as well as the laws that

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deprive Syrian citizens of their possessions, homes and properties because of their political background.

Syrian security services must be restructured to ensure that they adhere to the political agreement and the amended constitutional provisions, and ensure their integrity. This would include sacking the heads in the security services responsible for crimes committed against the Syrian people, and building a clear road map, under international supervision, to building a professional security apparatus.

These are just some of the elements of such a political agreement, with a number of others required to provide for a comprehensive solution to the issue of displacement, including a repatriation plan to be developed by the UNHCR, including the sequencing and prioritization of those most in need, certification of conditions to allow for return and coordination with host countries and defining the obligations of the state to provide compensation to returnees whose property has been destroyed beyond possibility for reconstruction or whose tenancy rights cannot be restored to the pre-March 2011 state.

In addition, a number of independent institutions would need to be established by the parties, with international participation and supervision, to deal with crucial issues like the search for the missing persons, conduct of security and police forces, distribution of repatriation assistance and reconstruction and property restitution.

And this is just the beginning. The implementation of such an agreement would inevitably see the reform of Syrian state, which from this perspective - with a rogue regime in Damascus, its Russian and Iranian allies and multiple other factions and states involved – seems unimaginable. The resulting reversal of demographic change engineered by the regime and Iran and dislodging of Russia's presence which permeates security and economic segments of the state may appear even more far-fetched. Yet, this is the only path, however difficult, that offers a hope for a genuine, sustainable political solution which would guarantee rights and dignity of all Syrians.

Demographic change is difficult to reverse, but its impact can be greatly diminished if independent and efficient mechanisms and institutions are

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established to oversee and implement organized return of the displaced. The Syrian regime is investing all its capacity to stop this from happening in a hope of retaining its poisonous dream of "useful Syria". However, the 13 million displaced Syrians are the only force which will decide upon its fate. And right now, according to our research, more than nine million are ready to return if the right conditions are in place. If they persevere in their determination to reclaim their homes and their country, Assad's attempt to engineer a "useful Syria" through demographic change will remain only that – a criminal, failed attempt.